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Soviet defector led KGB in U.S.

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Senior Soviet KGB defector Vitaly Yurchenko has been identified as Moscow's top North American spy operations expert, according to the U.S. State Department.

After weeks of official silence, the State Department said that Mr. Yurchenko has been in the United States "for some time" after defecting in Rome.

"Prior to his voluntary arrival in the United States in August 1985, Mr. Yurchenko served as deputy chief in the North American Department of the KGB's First Chief Directorate," the statement said. "The First Chief Directorate handles KGB intelligence operations worldwide."

Mr. Yurchenko "had previously asked that his presence here not be publicized," the statement said, explaining why official comment had been withheld prior to last week.

"Mr. Yurchenko was specifically responsible for KGB intelligence operations in the United States and Canada," the statement said.

During what was described as a "lengthy career" in the KGB, Mr. Yurchenko held "various key positions" in the KGB, including the most sensitive post of global counterintelligence — directing all penetrations of foreign governments and policing the KGB and GRU, the military spy service. He also ran KGB operations out of the Soviet embassy in Washington between 1975 and 1980, the State Department said.

As deputy chief in the North American department, Mr. Yurchenko would have directed several categories of KGB operations in the United States and Canada.

These activities, according to one intelligence expert who declined to be identified, would have included political, military and technological espionage, such as handling Americans and foreign nationals spying for Moscow; "active measures," — various covert action and "disinformation" programs; and a network of "illegal" agents operating independently of Soviet and East bloc diplomatic representatives.

The statement provided no dates for Mr. Yurchenko's duties before or after his 1980 posting in Washington. But he is believed to have directed KGB counterintelligence operations after leaving the Soviet embassy in Washington and prior to his promotion to chief of the North American department, a post he held until Aug. 1.

The State Department identified Mr. Yurchenko's counterspy role as "chief of Department 5 of Directorate K [worldwide counterintelligence] of the First Chief Directorate," a position that would have provided him with access to some aspects of virtually every operation of the KGB, GRU and East

bloc foreign intelligence services throughout the world.

Soviet security services conduct very active counterspy programs that require officers to monitor, to some degree, all Soviet and East bloc agents and the information they provide to the KGB and GRU, the intelligence expert said.

Intelligence sources close to Mr. Yurchenko's debriefing said the KGB officer has been providing U.S. authorities with a windfall of intelligence data about KGB operations and operational methods since August. His debriefing by Justice Department and CIA officials began then at an undisclosed location in the United States and is expected to continue for several years, these sources said.

So far, Mr. Yurchenko has uncovered two Americans — both former CIA operations officers — who are suspected of spying for the Soviet Union after leaving the agency. One of the former CIA operatives, Edward Lee Howard, eluded FBI surveillance agents late last month in New Mexico. He is being sought on espionage charges and is believed to have fled the country.